

London - Sydney 2005.

When asked if I fancied driving in a classic car rally from London to Sydney, I didn't even have a suitable car, but I was tempted by the adventure. A visit to the Goodwood Revival, where I met Kevin Law (of Orchard Restorations in Sussex), was enough to convince me that I should invest in a Jaguar XK140 drophead, a car of which I had dreamed since childhood. A left hand drive car was found in Holland and some essential modification, such as suspension strengthening and the fitting of a long range fuel tank, completed the preparation.



On August 14th 2005 we set off from Hyde Park corner in the centre of London. My car, registered in 1957, was the oldest and had the honour of leading the group away for a 3 month, 18,000 mile trip through 19 countries and some of the most spectacular driving routes on Earth.

We blasted through Europe to Turkey in just a week, in driving rain the whole way, to arrive the same weekend as the F1 race and the carpark known as Istanbul. Passing into Asia brought the first real change in terrain and landscape with Capadoccia being a fairytale countryside of sculpted rock. Even our hotel was carved out of the rock.



Central Turkey was eye opening and as we got further east, we became aware of the safety provisions made on our behalf by the organisation. On entry to Iran we were met by a fleet of brand new Mercedes Police cars which shepherded us from border to border, at times at speeds which verged on the suicidal until we made them understand that we were "Gentlemen tourists" not Dakar Rally drivers. The people of Iran were some of the most charming and friendly that we met on the whole trip and they missed no opportunity of taking our pictures on their ubiquitous mobile phones.

If they are supposed to be a repressed nation, we saw no evidence of it. Esfahan was a highlight with its' central square dominated by mosques around what used to be a Polo field in the days of the Shah. Iran is a young country and it was uplifting to see the 'enthusiasm of youth' in the square, rollerblading and chatting in groups

We entered Pakistan to find a fully equipped Army escort which marshalled us safely along the Afghanistan border. The country was chaotic but enchanting, the traffic a constant mix of dilapidated trucks, bicycles, donkey carts and children, all in the middle of the road. We were hosted in a reception by the Prime Minister who saw us as a boost to his flagging tourist industry. One of the highlights of the whole trip was the Karakoram Highway which links Pakistan with China. It is the highest metalled road in the world, rising to 17,000 feet amongst mountain peaks that tower up to 25,000 feet.



Three active tectonic plates meet in the area of the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush and Kashmir and days after we passed through the region it was hit by a massive earthquake which claimed 80,000 lives. It humbled our trip.



China was a revelation. Western China is mostly desert and in the Gobi we reached almost 500 metres below sea level, the second lowest point on earth after the Dead Sea. Most of the roads were under reconstruction so we learned quickly how to drive through sand, so much so that we resembled actors from the Lawrence of Arabia film in our drophead coupe, much to the amusement of the locals. One famous day, we were blocked en-route by a landslide and reached our hotel at 3am after 23 hours on the road

In Central China we had the privilege of seeing the Terracotta Army at Xian, surely one of the wonders of the world. The food in China was surprisingly good although we did turn our nose up at a bowl of jellied chicken feet, a local delicacy.



We had been concerned about the availability of petrol in the remoter regions but we should not have been. It seemed that there was a petrol station every 5 miles.

Our safety in China was assured by a guide who accompanied us and a succession of 'secret police' cars with smoked windows which shadowed us everywhere to make sure we did not stray off route.



From China we passed to Laos and were once again free to travel as we pleased. The countryside was utterly delightful, as were the people, very gentle and curious at our passing; a highlight of our journey. Malaysia was very organised, with wonderful roads but Thailand, apart from Bangkok, was a mild disappointment, perhaps because we were inland rather than on the beautiful coast, so well known from postcards and travel brochures. On reaching Singapore we had the chore of scrupulously cleaning our cars for entry into Australia where a draconian inspection regime was anticipated to protect the country from unwelcome immigrants such

as the 'Great African Snail'.

Shipping of the cars gave us all a 10 day break to take a 'holiday' before flying into Darwin to begin the final part of our journey, Australia.

The Northern Territories were surprisingly green as a result of unseasonal rain and we enjoyed the opportunity to travel the Stuart Highway at speed, since it had no speed limit and precious few bends. We made the obligatory excursion to Uluru (aka Ayres Rock) and it never fails to impress with it's geology and Aboriginal history. We travelled through the centre of Australia to Adelaide and followed another of the top ten driving routes in the world; The Great Ocean Road, through Melbourne to Sydney.



We crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge at 3pm on the 16th November 2005, to the hour planned in our itinerary and enjoyed celebration Champagne by the harbour with the Sydney Opera House as our backdrop. This says everything about a Global Rally event. It was impeccably organised with no detail too small to plan. Every hotel we stayed in was decent, some stunningly so, even in China which we had been dreading.

Having Paul Marsh, as professional mechanical back-up, proved it's worth on a daily basis. His skill and knowledge must be second to none. His wife Nikki James, a qualified doctor, kept all our bodies in shape, although patient confidentiality prevented us knowing how hard she worked, but she doubled up as a brilliant moral officer when spirits flagged after a long, hard day.



For my part, my car ran brilliantly, and it was surprising how quickly the daily routine of “fettling” the car ready for the next day, became a habit. Mechanical problems were few, none being ‘showstoppers’.

Three months on the road with the same group of people produces a special bond and it is this friendship that is one of the most enduring memories. Together, we enjoyed many highs, and suffered some lows. We helped each other out whenever someone hit trouble. But one of the biggest memories of this trip was meeting the people from the countries we were visiting. The arrival of ‘drop dead gorgeous’ Classic cars in these remote places, many of which you could not visit on your own, brings the place to a standstill. Within minutes of stopping, to buy fruit or water, the car is surrounded by excited children and just as excited adults. The car was permanently covered in finger prints. The experience made me realise how similar people are all over the world and how wrong preconceived stereotypes can be.



Iran was a good example. Supposed to be on “the axis of evil”, the nation is vilified and ostracised but our experience was radically different from that. This is the privilege of being part of a “Global Rally” group, to have the opportunity to have your eyes opened to experiences and locations that you would not otherwise visit. We saw so many vignettes of life on the road that made us smile. A man in a suit in the desert in Iran, 100km from civilisation in both directions, walking along the road carrying an ironing board under his arm. A donkey cart being loaded with hay until the cart tipped backwards leaving the donkey with all 4 legs in the air. A travelling salesman in Laos fast asleep across the handlebars of his moped which was completely hidden by pots and pans and the contents of a small hardware store.

Discovering the Global Rally Organisation has literally changed our lives and we have since enjoyed the Panama to Alaska Friendship Rally and have signed up for two more adventures in the future.



If you are thinking of joining a future event, do not hesitate. You will never regret it.
Neil Donnan



